

Big Pine Key - NOAA Fisheries Intent To Release Pilot Whales

Statement by Dr. Roy Crabtree, Southeast Regional Administrator

July 18, 2003

After reviewing the Florida Keys Marine Mammal Rescue Team's (FKMMRT) pilot whale release strategy, NOAA Fisheries believes the five pilot whales are candidates for releasing back into the wild. Therefore, it is NOAA Fisheries' intention to release the five animals, conditional on their continued progress of good health that will allow them to safely return to the wild and not be a threat to wild populations of marine mammals.

When an animal is released, the experts responsible for those animals' behavior must proceed cautiously and responsibly. In this regard, FKMMRT and Marine Mammal Conservancy have done well. At the request of FKMMRT, NOAA fisheries is providing additional support and expertise to prepare the whales for release. NOAA will be providing resources, personnel on site, and security as necessary.

NOAA Fisheries has consulted with Jeff Foster of Marine Research Consultants, an expert in preparing wild marine mammals for release. Jeff has preliminarily assessed the work thus far of local rescue groups and finds the animals have progressed significantly since their mass stranding on April 18, 2003.

Jeff Foster and a team of marine mammal behavior experts will work with local volunteer rescue groups preparing the animals for release. The preparations are expected to be accomplished within two to three weeks. Jeff and his team will be working closely with the volunteer rescue groups.

These five animals must meet criteria that will allow them to safely return to the wild and not be a threat to wild populations of marine mammals. NOAA Fisheries marine mammal experts, Jeff Foster's team, and local rescue groups will be evaluating the progress of the animals health and behavior on a regular basis up through release.